

Chesapeake Bay Foundation Comments
Charlottesville, Virginia

USDA Farm Bill Listening Session
1 November 2005

I am Ann Jennings, executive director of the Virginia office of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. CBF has been working for many years to advocate for conservation programs and to provide technical and financial assistance to farmers to establish riparian buffers, cover crops, rotational grazing, and other conservation practices to reduce nutrient pollution to our rivers and streams. CBF has considerable experience providing technical assistance for conservation programs working directly with over 800 farmers and landowners.

One of the most serious threats to the Chesapeake Bay's health is the loss of farmland to suburban sprawl. "Saving the bay" requires saving farmland, and the farmers working this land. We are very concerned about farmers' ability to remain profitable when farm income does not keep pace with costs of property taxes, health insurance, farm equipment and other expenses. In 1952, farmers received 47 cents for every dollar that consumers spent on food. By the year 2000, that share had dropped to only 20 cents of every dollar, representing a 57% decrease.

We sincerely hope that the 2007 Farm Bill will help farmers improve profitability, while establishing and maintaining conservation practices to protect water quality. Farmers in Virginia face growing challenges meeting the requirements of nutrient management plans, especially in areas where soils are saturated with phosphorus. The challenges are increasing as tributary strategies are developed for nearly 4,000 miles of Virginia streams that are impaired.

The Farm Bill must more equitably provide funds across the nation and across types of commodities. It must also shift its emphasis from support payments for the production of a few commodity crops to a conservation-based incentive system that rewards all producers for the environmental benefits they can produce.

Mid-Atlantic farmers do not receive their fair share of federal Farm Bill dollars, ranking near the bottom in terms of federal support for agriculture, garnering only \$0.01-\$0.03 for every dollar in agricultural production. However, North Dakota farmers receive \$0.17 for every dollar in agricultural production and the national average is \$0.06.

Farmers require technical and financial assistance to establish conservation practices such as riparian buffers and cover crops, which benefit all of us who care about water quality. However, many farmers who wish to participate in these conservation programs are turned away due to inadequate funding.

A much better way to use public funds to support farmers and their livelihoods would be to base funding on conservation that provides a public good, without negatively affecting markets in other countries. Payments should be based on the outcomes of their conservation efforts, such as water quality benefits.

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) was established in the 2002 Farm Bill with the intent to do just this. We urge you to advocate for improvements and funding so that all farms meeting conservation criteria would be entitled to receive funds, much like all farms meeting basic criteria are eligible for commodity subsidies.

Another program that deserves increased funding is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that provides cost-share assistance and financial incentives to establish conservation practices. The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program provides rental payments and incentives for installing and maintaining buffers for water quality. Both deserve improved funding.

The next Farm Bill should also provide funding for new, innovative approaches to resolve some of our most serious water quality problems. It should provide financial and technical support for efforts to adjust livestock feed rations to more precisely meet nutritional needs and minimize the nutrients in manure, and develop cost-effective alternative uses for manure such as energy generation, composting, and reclamation of lands damaged by mining and other uses.

We hope that the next Farm Bill will maintain farmers' livelihoods in a manner that also provides the necessary assistance for conservation efforts that will lead to healthy streams throughout the nation. Farm and conservation leaders have already begun discussing their priorities with legislators to shape the 2007 Farm Bill.

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